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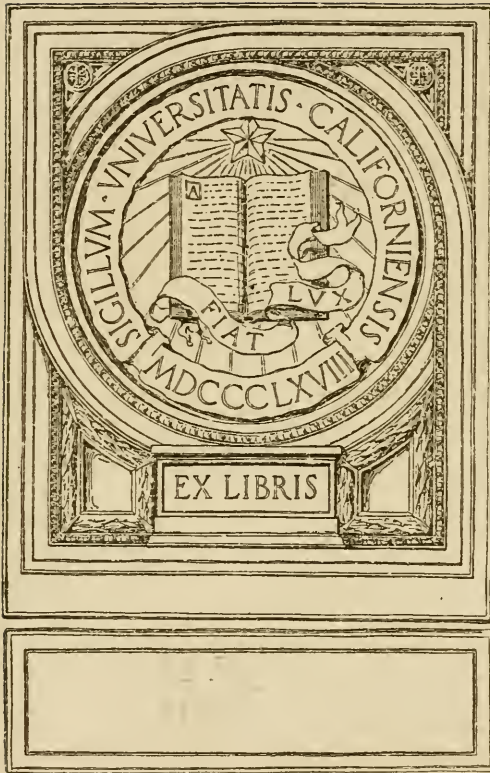
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SIR WALTER SCOTT

GEORGE WYNDHAM



SIR WALTER SCOTT

BY

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NOTE

THE following pages contain the speech in which the Toast of Honour was proposed by the President to the Members of "The Edinburgh Walter Scott Club" at their Fourteenth Annual Dinner on the 29th November 1907.

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Sir Walter Scott

MY LORD PROVOST AND GENTLEMEN—Any man rising to propose “The Memory of Sir Walter Scott” in any gathering must needs be abashed. Should he keep to the beaten path, Charity herself could but say with Dr. Johnson that his speech “contains much that is true and trite.” Should he digress from the obvious, Justice must add with the sage, “and much that is original and ridiculous.” But when, as now, a speaker born south of the Tweed stands confronted by “The Edinburgh Walter Scott Club”; when, as to-night, your President, less fortunate in that capacity than twelve of his predecessors, can claim no bond of nativity with you and the subject of your loving reverence; why then, gentlemen, he can only reflect that you are wholly responsible for the aberration of your choice, and claim acquittal for his conduct of the case, “If”—as Sir Walter was so fond of quoting—“If, so he be in that concatenation accordingly.”

Not for me the privileged nonchalance of

SIR WALTER SCOTT

my predecessors! Of, say, Mr. Haldane, with his easy "In this Our dining-room, restrained from the criticism of . . . outsiders, we may let OURSELVES go a little about OURSELVES." From that point of view your President is an outsider. But I make no apology for intrusion. From any other point of view, and there are many, I may say to you, with Plutarch's old soldier who found a solitary freedman performing the funeral rites of Pompey the Great, "O Friend . . . thou shalt not have all this honour alone . . . to bury the only and most famous captain of the Romans." From any other point of view, I expostulate with Byron:—

Scotland! Still proudly claim thy native bard,
And be thy praise his first and best reward,
Yet not with thee alone his name should live,
But own the vast renown a world can give.

My concatenation is œcumenical. But do not be alarmed. Of the many points of view from which the memory of Sir Walter Scott may be regarded, I shall occupy only three.

There is one, remote indeed from the world's renown because intimate to any man born a Briton, which I cannot ignore. To the Briton, aware of his natal prerogatives, there are few better than this: that Walter Scott may be, first a living part of his childhood, and then the entertainer of his youth, before he becomes the companion of riper years. I remember vividly my delight on discovering the story of *Rob Roy*

SIR WALTER SCOTT

when reading that wonderful book for the third time at the age of eleven. The earlier attempts had been breathless plunges into seas of incomprehensible dialect; "adventures of a diver" hazarded to snatch the pearls of freebooting. At eleven I was still rather shy of "Diana Vernon." Later on I fell in love with her, like the rest of you, and, after further reperusals, came at last to such an appreciation of "Andrew Fairservice" as may be vouchsafed to a Briton who is not a Scot.

But consider the subtle and complex charm of Scott's novels to any man who savours them in maturity after looting them as a boy; to any man who recalls the young companions with whom he impersonated their characters, "all now," in Scott's phrase—for he could turn a phrase when he cared—"all now sequestered or squandered"—working at large in the far ranges of the Empire, or toiling each in his tunnel at home. Any such, though born a generation after Scott died, can truly say with Scott's friend, Lady Louisa Stuart, "They awaken in me feelings I could hardly explain to another. They are to me less like books than like letters one treasures up, pleasant yet mournful to the soul, and I cannot open one of them without a thousand recollections." That is one point of view.

Yes; but turn the page in the *Letters* (i. 49) for Scott's reply to his friend, and you

SIR WALTER SCOTT

read—in the language of courteous formality which belonged to his time and in no way justifies the absurd charge of undue deference to rank sometimes preferred against him—“I am very glad your Ladyship found the tales in some degree worth your notice. It cost me a terrible effort to finish them, for between distress of mind and body I was unfit for literary composition. But in justice to my booksellers I was obliged to dictate while I was scarce able to speak for pain.” Thus, in the one year 1819, at the age of 48, did Scott give to Scotland and the world, in seven volumes, *The Bride of Lammermoor*, *The Legend of Montrose*, and *Ivanhoe*. And thus he fought on for thirteen more years, showering forth volumes each one of which was received with ecstasy by Europe; but, for himself, toiling and suffering, yet gentle and undaunted, through ruin due to the fault of others, through bereavement, through fear—the only fear he knew—lest increasing illness should destroy that magic faculty by which he was determined to vindicate a chivalrous point of honour and to safeguard the home on which his human affections were set. That, gentlemen, is another point of view. From it we may contemplate, not the story-teller who entranced our boyhood, nor the singer of Romance, nor the delineator of character, nor the patriot who revealed Scotland to herself as another Normandy of high-born hearts, nor the

SIR WALTER SCOTT

essayist, nor the biographer, nor the captain in a world-wide literary movement ; but simply, a Man ; a man so brave, so kind, so sensible, that he encourages our manhood and knocks the nonsense out of us all.

What a man ! Think of his magnanimity. He, of all men, wrote the only generous criticism on the Third Canto of *Childe Harold* (1816) at a moment when the world, for reasons, good, bad, and idiotic, united to crush the rival who had eclipsed his poetic fame. His criticism was generous. But it was just. Generosity as a rule is more true than detraction. What can be sounder than this, "Almost all (his) characters . . . are more or less Lord Byron himself, and yet you never tire of them. It is the same set of stormy emotions acting on the same powerful mind . . . it is the same sea dashing on the same rocks, yet presented to us under such a variety of appearance that they have all the interest of novelty." When Byron dies in 1824, it is Scott, the Bayard without reproach, who writes, "I have been terribly distressed at poor Byron's death. In talents he was unequalled, and his faults were those rather of a bizarre temper . . . than any depravity of disposition. He was devoid of selfishness, which I take to be the basest ingredient in the human composition."

If that was his attitude towards the rival who had beaten him in poetry, so was it towards

SIR WALTER SCOTT

the partner who had ruined him in business. In the shock of the crash that levelled the whole edifice of his hopes, he can say, "To nourish angry passions against a man whom I really liked, would be to lay a blister on my own heart."

Think of his sterling sense. He liked an artist to be "a right good John Bull, bland and honest and open, without any . . . nonsensical affectation." "Having observed," he writes, "how very unhappy literary persons are made (not to say ridiculous into the bargain) by pitching their thoughts and happiness on popular fame," I "resolved to avoid at least that error." Some recent contributors to a literary correspondence may be pained to hear that Scott cared for popularity only as a means to supporting his family and paying twenty shillings in the pound. For that he would work "at the rate of £24,000 a year," checked only by this saving reflection—"but then we must not bake buns faster than people have appetite to eat them."

He loved individual liberty. No cobbler, if he had his way, should lose his stall to facilitate street improvements. That was before the days of the London County Council.

But turn from that to his public patriotism. When things were not going too well with our armies and Joanna Baillie despaired to him of our country's future: "I detest croaking," says he; "if true, it is unpatriotic, and if false, worse."

SIR WALTER SCOTT

. . . My only ambition," he goes on, "is to be remembered, if remembered at all, as one who knew and valued national independence, and would maintain it in the present struggle to the last man and the last guinea, tho' the last guinea were my own property, and the last man my own son."

The claims of individual liberty and public patriotism have blinded some men to the nicest scruples of personal honour. But they never blinded Scott. "If," he writes, "I were capable in a moment of weakness of doing anything short of what my honour demanded, I would die the death of a poisoned rat in a hole, out of mere sense of my own degradation." No wonder that he fought on! Refusing a touching offer of help with the observation, "There is much good in the world, after all. But I will involve no friend, either rich or poor. My own right hand shall do it." It is not as if he liked labour. He loathed it. So he recalls his "flourishing plantations," and exclaims, ". . . *Barbarus has segetes*, I will write my finger-ends off first."

The morning rays of youthful enterprise faded out from the "sober twilight" in which he laboured. But he is never gloomy. On the contrary, he illumines his solitude with beams of the mellowest humour and flashes of delightful wit. It is we who are sad; not he; haranguing "Madam Duty" and calling her the

SIR WALTER SCOTT

plainest word in the English language. And, as Swinburne has pointed out, now that we have the *Journal*, we need no longer be sad. For we see him as he was, gay and buoyant to the last ; not tortured by Fortune, as we thought, but rounding on the fickle goddess with the merriest quips, until weariness and suffering wring from him the first faltering note—"I often wish I could lie down and sleep without waking. But I will fight it out, if I can." And he just could. Death released him in the moment of victory. He was wont, in his modesty, to disparage the writer by comparison with the soldier. But Wolf did not die more gloriously on the Heights of Abraham. And when he died we are glad to know that "every newspaper in Scotland and many in England had signs of mourning usual on the" death "of a king." His royal soul passed on its way from a sorrowing nation. If there can be an epic in the intimate prose of one man's private letters and journal, the *Journal* and *Letters* of Sir Walter Scott are an epic of the British home.

I have touched on the redoubled delight which the novels can give to any man who has read them as a boy. I have dwelt on the part which Scott himself played as a man. He was a great man. But was he a great artist? That is my third point of view. If we are to consider him fairly from that point of view, we must strip from his works the glamour reflected on them,

SIR WALTER SCOTT

both from our own early associations, and from our present knowledge of the personality which he was at such pains to dissemble.

What did he accomplish as an artist? What effects of his art endure? We must face these questions in an artistic age, when so few achieve anything memorable, and so many assert that the mighty dead lacked finish. Scott "gives himself away" to the apostles of precious sterility. Let us make that admission. But let us also make the corresponding claim. He gives himself away in harvests. He was not, all allow, "a barren rascal," and we need not review the amount of his work. But neither, all must concede, was he a punctilious creator. "His literary life" resembled, he tells us, "the natural life of a savage; absolute indolence interchanged with hard work." And we know, again from him, that he cheerfully ended the second volume of a novel without "the slightest idea how the story was to be wound up to a catastrophe." In what sense, then, was he a great artist, or as we hold in this Club, one of the greatest? Scott could turn a phrase with precision when he pleased; none better. But let us go deeper.

A great artist, interpreting mankind to men, and reconciling man to his lot, does one of two things; and the greatest do both. He either bequeathes a vast completed monument to posterity, or else he invents a new method as a guide to future endeavour. Scott's claim under

SIR WALTER SCOTT

the first head is not in dispute. Let us establish his claim under the second head; his claim to have invented a method that was both new and dynamic.

To do that I will put a competent and impartial witness into the box. I am too ignorant to be competent, too enamoured to be impartial.

I put Nassau Senior into the box. I have by me his reviews of the novels conveniently collected from the *Quarterly* and bound in one volume. To read them is to look back at the immediate impression made by the novels on a critic, competent, impartial, even I may say hostile. Senior, educated at Eton, and distinguished at Oxford, belongs, in terms of the conflict between "Classics and Romantics," distinctly to the Classical tradition, and is apt enough to behave "in that concatenation accordingly." He writes in 1821, seven years after *Waverley* was published, still in ignorance of its authorship so complete, that he notes an heraldic error committed by the "unknown" in *Ivanhoe*, and, turning to *Marmion*, wonders at the coincidence of "a similar mistake in his great rival, Sir Walter Scott." And this is what he says—or rather what "we" say, for he never relaxes the august plural of Gifford's critical engine:—"WE shall never forget the disappointment and listlessness with which in the middle of a watering-place long vacation WE tumbled a

SIR WALTER SCOTT

new, untalked-of, anonymous novel out of the box which came to Us from Our faithless librarian, filled with substitutes for everything WE had ordered. . . . WE opened it, at hazard, in the second volume, and instantly found Ourselves, with as much surprise as *Waverley* . . . in the centre of the Chevalier's court. Little did WE suspect while we wondered who this literary giant might be, that seven years after, WE should be reviewing so many more of his volumes." Senior looks back once again, in 1824, to the wonderful day on which he first read *Waverley* in the seaside lodging-house, "little aware that the work which was delighting us was to form an epoch in the literary history of the world." My hostile Classical witness gives abundant testimony to the novelty and force of Scott's art.

Its immediate effect was no less evident to all non-critical contemporaries. A Hungarian tradesman pointed out the bust of "le sieur Valtere Skote" as the portrait of "l'homme le plus célèbre en l'Europe." Dr. Walsh, travelling from Constantinople to England, found the fame of Scott's works at every stage from the frontier of Christendom. But let us consider the moment at which Scott produced this effect.

It was in 1814, the year of the Congress of Vienna, that Scott, "rummaging in the drawers of an old cabinet," found the mislaid MS. of *Waverley*, and "took the fancy of finishing it."

SIR WALTER SCOTT

He did finish the last two volumes in the course of three summer weeks, and writes, "I had a great deal of fun in the accomplishment of this task, though I do not expect that it will be popular in the South, as much of the humour, if there be any, is local, and some of it even professional." Yet it is odds to-day that the name of *Waverley* is familiar to as many as the names of *Castlereagh* or *Metternich*.

Scott produced this effect at the climax of a series of political convulsions which had wracked the diplomacy and shattered the armies of Europe. Blood enough had been spilled. And now ink was to be spilled. For that one book did more than any other to precipitate the controversy between Classics and Romantics. And Scott did more than any other writer to give impulse and area to the Romantic School.

By what method, we may ask, did he make the Chevalier interesting in 1814 not only to Senior, my Classical witness, but to nations who knew nothing of Scottish manners, and cared little enough, I daresay, for an abortive effort to retrieve one lost crown prosecuted in an age almost forgotten by men who had seen the crowns of all Europe redistributed, by the Revolution, by Napoleon, and the Congress?

Let us look at his method. *Waverley*, *Guy Mannering*, *Redgauntlet* are written, as Scott himself tells us, round the professional knowledge of a lawyer with a predilection for

SIR WALTER SCOTT

lawlessness. Their origins are of the driest. Never did such irritating grains of sand excite the production of such pearls. These cannot be accidents of Scott's temperament and vocation. We cannot explain him as a literary oyster. Indeed, the image is inadequate. They are not pearls, but, rather, gems bespeaking design. Senior tries to explain the method of their execution. He addresses himself to a new harmony in literature and seeks to account for its charm. He notes that the author of *Waverley* painted two classes: beggars and gipsies, sovereigns and their favourites, "the very lowest and the very highest ranks of society," better "than that rank to which he must himself belong." And asks how the author came to copy more correctly what he knew imperfectly, than what he knew well? After canvassing the question, backwards and forwards, he concludes that portraits partly imagined may be more true than portraits wholly observed; and so affirms that Scott, by employing both imagination and observation in conjunction, had indeed discovered a new method which saved him from two dangers: the danger "of losing general resemblance in too close a copy of individuals with whom he was intimate," and the further danger "of introducing effort . . . over-colouring and caricature . . . in his endeavour to render striking . . . representations of the well-known." Now those are the errors of Realism. Senior

SIR WALTER SCOTT

saw that it was a mistake, by focussing the obvious, to belie general experience widely imagined; and a greater mistake to make the obvious grotesque in order to redeem it from dulness.

Scott avoided these two errors to which realism is prone. But he did far more, which was not apparent to a Classic making reluctant concessions to a Romantic. Senior gets at half the truth of Scott's new departure, but only at half.

In order to get at the whole truth; in order to understand the magnitude of Scott's innovation, we must consider the condition of literature at the moment when he rummaged in the drawers of that old cabinet.

Scott's complete achievement is still obscured to us by the conflict between Classics and Romantics. Nor is that strange. The din and dust of the conflict puzzled even the protagonists engaged in it. You have Goethe declaring "The Classic is health, the Romantic disease." And you have Victor Hugo, dubbed, like Scott, a leader of the Romantics, denying the existence of the conflict and even the meaning of the terms. Hugo asserts, in 1824, that the two battle-cries—*les deux mots de guerre*—have no meaning unless, indeed, "Classic" meant only literature of an earlier epoch, and Romantic only literature that had developed with the nineteenth century.

SIR WALTER SCOTT

But that will not do. The romantic movement, and the conflict, were each of them real enough. And two qualifications must be added. In the first place, the romantic movement derived from a date far anterior to 1800, from Macpherson's *Ossian* (1761-63), Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764), and Bishop Percy's *Reliques* (1765). The movement then migrated to Germany, and became fantastic. It returned to Britain and became gruesome. In the second place, the conflict was not a straight issue between Classics and Romantics. That is why Hugo and others misunderstood what they were fighting about. The conflict was more truly a triangular turmoil between Classics, Romantics, and Realists. It was launched by Classics on the monstrous developments to which romantic and realistic methods had been pushed. The Classics were making reprisals on both, and Scott defeated those reprisals by combining the two.

Romance founded on imagination, and Realism founded on observation, are the primary methods by which the mind seeks to express the need of the heart. The classic method is a secondary mode. It can be, and had been, applied alike to the Romantic and the Realistic. Throughout the eighteenth century the classic mode had selected and polished until the element of wonder had disappeared from literature's image of life. The romantic

SIR WALTER SCOTT

image, classically treated, had become, as it were, a statue in a nobleman's park. The realistic image, classically treated, had become, as it were, any party of nobodies—"buddies," I think, you call them in Scotland—seated round a table, and applying delicate seismometers to every tremor, however faint, with which the heart responds to any fact, however trivial. This was too dull; yes, and too false to life, in which wonder is the most constant element. After smoothing the romantic into the inane, it had to be galvanised into the diabolic. After sweetening the realistic with sentiment, it had to be salted with satire. The passion for wonder revived, and was gratified. It was indulged till the Romantic School, developing into the School of Horror, turned their statue into a hobgoblin; and the Realistic School, developing into a School of Scandal, turned their "nobodies" into high-tobymen and demi-reps. Each tried to tickle or shock. The romance of Ossian was exaggerated to the gruesome by Monk Lewis. The realism of Defoe was spiced to the satirical; delightfully by the incomparable Jane Austen, and outrageously by ruder hands. Peacock, whose *Maid Marian* appeared in 1819 with *Ivanhoe*, combines both extravagances in the satirical-fantastic.

It is here that Scott intervenes with momentous effect and enduring results. He eschewed, as Senior noted, the excesses of the Realists.

SIR WALTER SCOTT

But he also eschewed the excesses of the Romantics. He rejected the fantastic from romance and the cynical from realism. His huge performance was to hark back to the first springs of each, at the moment when the Classics declared war on the enormities to which both were committed.

Scott stepped back—so to say—to embrace a wider panorama of humanity and, from a position of artistic detachment, painted what he saw, tinged by the aerial perspective of wonder. His image of life is the “*verissima, dulcissima imago*”; true, but not trite; sweet, but not false; wonderful, but not inhuman. He made an epoch in literature by creating romantic-realism; by clothing actuality with atmosphere; by striking a richer chord from notes of human experience which till then had been sounded singly.

No doubt he was lucky—like all conquerors. He happened to have loved the old romantic poetry, and imitated it admirably in his early poems. He happened to have understood the new realistic prose, and explained Defoe’s method in his famous analysis of Mrs. Veal’s apparition “the next day after her death.” So, in 1814, he trained the two into one channel, and drew off their united power from the welter of literary cross-currents. He produced a pure stream of literary energy. And that stream flowed for fifty years and more, turning the

SIR WALTER SCOTT

mills of many movements even outside literature ; of the Oxford movement in religion ; the Young England movement in politics, and the Morris-Rossetti movement in art.

His achievement as an artist is that he appealed to the general feelings of mankind by truth, wonder, and charm.

Perhaps his strangest charm is woven by his unexpected reconciliations—of the lawyer and outlaw, of the servant and master, of the Jacobite and Hanoverian, of Scotland and England, of “Time long past” and “To-day.”

By these reconciliations ; by searching for hidden chords of human experience, he feels his way to the supreme reconciliation of man to man’s destiny. That is the work, often unconscious, of great masters. But for their magical counterpoint the present would be all to each of us ; “an apex,” Pater calls it, “between two hypothetical eternities” ; a naked note, so poignant that it pierces. As Landor puts it, “The present, like a note of music, is nothing but as it appertains to what is past and what is to come.” But how few among writers, classic, romantic, or realistic, have shown this by their art. Walter Scott is of those few. He extracted secrets from oblivion to endow what is with the mystery of what has been ; and, so, puts us in case to expect the future. He strikes a full chord

SIR WALTER SCOTT

upon the keys of time. It is only the greatest musicians of humanity who thus exalt the present by fealty to the past and make it a herald of eternal harmonies.

He leads us through the maze of time and seems to hold a clue. We wander with him, and we wonder with him, till we believe with him that the labyrinth of man's fate must lead some whither worth our seeking.

And he made light of all this. But for necessity that clamped him to the desk till his pen dropped from a dying hand, he would have bade farewell to his task with a Sidney's

Splendidis longum valedico nugis.

Yet his radiant trifles are the regalia of his native land, and symbols of a suzerainty that still influences the literature of Europe. That is much. But there is more. His worth as a man excels his work as an author. It is an example of valour to all men, in all lands, for ever.

Gentlemen, I ask you to drink, in reverent silence, to the undying and beloved memory of SIR WALTER SCOTT.

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